



Opportunities for Leadership:

Meeting Community Information Needs 2011

Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo

September 2011

Go to informationneeds.org to see videos of the profiled foundations

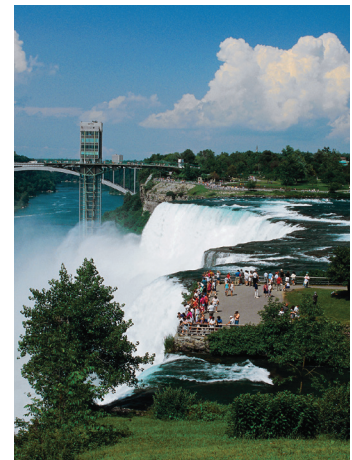


 Knight Foundation

How a Foundation Reinvented Itself for Community Change

Growing the Western New York Environmental Movement

When Clotilde Dedecker joined the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo in 2006, she knew her leadership skills would be tested. The board wanted to play a more visible leadership role in the community and increase the relevance of one of the oldest community foundations in the country. Dedecker was regarded as a powerhouse – “an extraordinary leader who never has a slow moment,” says one board member – and yet, she approached the foundation’s first strategic plan by listening to community members’ stories and issues of concern in the Greater Buffalo area. One of the most compelling issues that surfaced during the listening tour was the need to create a healthier environment for all residents. By improving the natural environment, the Buffalo community would have a greater ability to reduce racial and ethnic disparities and increase educational, cultural and job opportunities.



Buffalo and its surrounding eight-county region are home to significant natural resources, including 20 percent of the world’s fresh water supply. But it also has a very serious environmental legacy because of its industrial heritage. Situated on Niagara Falls and the Great Lakes, Western New York was a major heavy industry and transit hub in the mid-20th century. In 1978, it was also declared home to the first U.S. Superfund site, at Love Canal, where toxic contamination from local industry had caused health problems among residents. Considered the birthplace of the environmental justice movement, the region three decades later continues to fight toxic contamination and a lack of green space, which have caused increased rates of asthma, obesity and heart disease in its residents.

Part of the problem has been that hundreds of organizations in the region have been working independently for decades to address these issues, and have struggled to make significant, far-reaching progress. When the foundation was developing its strategy four years ago, it saw an opportunity to make a difference on these issues. By catalyzing the formation of the Western New York Environmental Alliance and creating its online information hub, GrowWNY.org, to share information with and connect nonprofits and the general public, CFGB is ensuring that the region’s environmental leaders will work together more effectively and generate greater impact for the community. Since taking on this leadership role, Dedecker and her staff have also transformed the way the foundation does its work – integrating community information into the work they do, not only with the environment, but in affordable housing, education and poverty reduction.

The Foundation Reinvents Itself as a Community Information Leader

Coming out of its strategic planning process in 2007, the foundation announced a major shift in its strategy. “We were good grant-makers,” Dedecker recalls, “but we were not using other potential tools in our toolbox [such as convening, capacity building and public awareness building]. We needed to step up to increase our impact in the community.” Dedecker saw information as a critical tool to help the foundation play a leadership role and fulfill its mission to connect people, ideas and resources to improve lives in their community. She saw that their work could be enhanced through the use of information technology. “When you take good information, you aggregate it and you share it, you get better results.”

In October 2008, the foundation facilitated the region’s first Environmental Congress to help organizations start working together around shared interests. They expected about 60 regional organizations to participate. Instead, representatives from 150 groups showed up. Some were large, well-established nonprofits; others were small, grassroots advocacy groups; many were virtually unknown to the foundation. Their missions ranged from advocating for the responsible clean-up of dirty power plants, to protecting the biodiversity of the region’s park systems, to providing young people with more opportunities to access and steward the natural environment. As one attendee, Larry Brooks from Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper, described, “Each of us had our heads down, blinders up, focused on our own work, and we weren’t talking to each other very much. So it was fragmented, until the community foundation got us talking and created this central hub where all things connected.” As more conversations took place, the organizations began to collaborate more, set a strategic direction and attract collective funding. Out of that work, the Alliance identified the need to support ongoing information sharing among the organizations. With the foundation’s commitment to lead this effort, they created GrowWNY.org (Green Renaissance of WNY).

The goals of GrowWNY.org were twofold: to connect the region’s environmental nonprofits by sharing information about their work with one another, and to make information about the environment more accessible and actionable for residents. CFGB’s staff and board committed to leading the process of creating and launching GrowWNY.org because they knew that it would help the environmental movement be more effective. Although the foundation had never used information technology for social change prior to the GrowWNY project, CFGB’s board knew the foundation’s involvement was consistent with its role as a community leader. Board chair Alphonso O’Neil-White explained,

*“Part of being a leader is bringing people together – in any context – to share information.
... If we can create the context for sharing information, we can generate action.”*

Using Information to Build a Movement

When the foundation received its Knight Community Information Challenge grant, CFGB's leadership work went into hyper-drive. "We had never been focused on promoting good information on both sides of an issue so that better decisions could be made. We also hadn't tried to change citizen behavior," said Dedecker. "This project was an opportunity to try new things." Through information, the foundation demonstrated its leadership role for the Buffalo and Western New York regions in two key ways:

- Creating a digital platform to support the strategic priorities of its partners.
- Building the foundation's internal capacity – and the capacity of its nonprofit partners – to ensure the effective use of information and technology.

Creating a digital platform to support the strategic priorities of its partners

CFGB has played a hands-on role in supporting the strategic direction of the Western New York Environmental Alliance. During the website's design phase, the foundation played an important role by working closely with nonprofit partners to ensure that their needs were met, as well as pushing for features that would make important environmental issues more accessible to mainstream residents. The foundation saw the creation of GrowWNY.org as a clear opportunity to ensure that the collaborative work of the Alliance could continue and that members' capacity to engage community audiences was increased.

"GrowWNY is the glue that helps the Alliance do all the other work we need to do."

*Erin Heaney, Executive Director
Clean Air Coalition of Western New York*

Now that the website has launched, GrowWNY is an important communications and information vehicle that helps the Alliance maintain a stronger network. "GrowWNY is the glue that helps the Alliance do all the other work we need to do," explains Erin Heaney, Executive Director of the Clean Air Coalition of Western New York, one of the 150 nonprofit partners in the network. In addition, the website is helping to increase access to information about environmental issues for the area's residents. In order to reach a more mainstream audience, the site itself is organized to be accessible to, and encourage action among, residents. It is rich with interactive features, such as the *Go Outside Map* of outdoor activities, the *What's My Footprint? Calculator*, and a *community events calendar*. Information related to key issue areas, such as Food and Agriculture or Energy and climate, are easy to find on the site as well.

Building internal capacity – and the capacity of nonprofit partners – to ensure the effective use of information and technology

Dedecker describes the foundation's leadership role in the Western New York environmental movement as "high touch and high tech," combining in-person meetings and decision-making with online information sharing and communications; "High touch" was something that came very naturally to all of us. But "high-tech" was not as natural." In order to build a great platform with engaging content, the foundation had to increase its capacity and the capacity of its nonprofit partners to use information technology effectively.

To build the foundation's own capacity, they hired web designers Free Range Studios, who were well known for their mission-driven services and helped to educate the foundation about this new area of communications. They also increased and reallocated staff resources to manage the website and conduct community outreach, such as setting up tables at farmers markets to raise awareness about GrowWNY's information resources.

To build the capability of their partners to use GrowWNY, CFGB provided training and equipment, such as flip cams, to make it easy for time-constrained staff to produce content for the site. They also sought additional funding from other foundations to make the project a reality. As Alliance partner Robert Shibley said, "Long after they're done talking about how much money can come from the foundation, they're engaging other entities – municipal government and other funders – to see where else they can get together the necessary resources and support." The foundation and its partners have successfully leveraged more than \$1.6 million in the past four years from CFGB donors, Knight Foundation, and state and federal grants to support their collective environmental goals.

Lessons in Leadership: Transformation in Buffalo and at the Foundation

Now that GrowWNY is up and running, the foundation's nonprofit partners are changing the way that they engage each other and their constituents. Nonprofits large and small are shifting from an analog to a digital communications strategy that is more relevant for today's audience. They are using the site to post event notices and news about issues they are working on, and they are experimenting with digital media to get the word out to an increasingly tech-savvy audience.

Nonprofits are also sharing information with each other's audiences, organizing community events together, approaching policy issues collaboratively and aligning strategies. This new coordination has created opportunities for nonprofits to think big. As Zoe Hollomon of the Massachusetts Avenue Project, a nonprofit partner, said, "We're trying to speak beyond our regular constituent group to groups and individuals who have never been involved. It feels like there is new momentum." In the community, a small but growing number of residents are accessing information online, from approximately 600 weekly unique visitors in February 2011 to more than 750 weekly visitors in June 2011.

As the foundation has gotten deeper into this work, it has found new opportunities to use information to play a more visible role in the community. For example, when the City of Buffalo sought community stakeholder perspectives to inform the city's new zoning codes, they went to CFGB and GrowWNY first. For the Foundation, it was a new opportunity for leadership as their stakeholders helped to shape the city's sustainable land use plan, known as the Green Code. Justin Booth of Green Options Buffalo says, "Without the foundation's leadership, I don't think the environmental community would have had such a prominent voice at the table throughout the ongoing process to develop a new land-use plan and zoning code." And through its Green and Healthy Homes Initiative, the foundation is playing a crucial intermediary role to integrate city and county public services. With support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, CFGB spearheaded a lead poisoning prevention and awareness campaign targeted at low-income families living in older homes. Now more than 200 homes are lead free and safer for young children, adults have been trained and placed in green jobs that will make their neighborhoods healthier, and thousands of residents are more aware of safety hazards and the abatement programs that combat them.

CFGB has described its experience as transformative.

“We have been catapulted into the 21st century because of this work. Sometimes I think about how far behind we would be if we hadn’t decided to do this,” said vice president for programs Cara Matteliano.

And in the process, the foundation has successfully adapted its work internally to be a more effective community information leader by:

- **Integrating communications into program activities.** Previously, the communications function was used primarily for donor engagement, but as more of the foundation’s key initiatives incorporated information, this specialized expertise added significantly to CFGB’s program capacity.
- **Creating new expectations for grantees.** Today, the foundation requires all grantees in their environment program to contribute to the GrowWNY website. Funded projects are expected to incorporate web and social media into their plans for reaching and engaging their target audiences.
- **Incorporating new communications tools** into its public-facing marketing and communications repertoire, using video and social media more readily to reach their constituents.

The foundation’s transformation has been nearly as dramatic as the impact it has had on the Buffalo community, with more, surely, to come. “This project has transformed the way the foundation approaches its community change work,” says Dedecker.

Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo

Asset Size:

\$205 million

Demographic Reach:

Approximately 2.5 million residents in the eight-county Western New York/Greater Buffalo region

KCIC Award:

\$188,000 in 2009, \$133,000 in 2011

Website:

GrowWNY.org

Project Description:

GrowWNY.org is an online information hub that provides information on a wide range of topics related to the region's environmental issues. GrowWNY helps residents become more informed and engaged; they can learn more about how to personally "green" their lives and positively impact the environment or inspire policy changes among public and private decision makers in the region. For member nonprofits, GrowWNY.org supports knowledge sharing and collective action on priority areas of interest. The website also helps nonprofits communicate more effectively to a broader audience. It serves as the information vehicle for the broader strategic efforts of the Western New York Environmental Alliance.

Growth in average monthly unique visitors to GrowWNY.org, February – June 2011:

25 percent

Next Steps

To learn more about how your foundation can get involved in addressing your community's information needs and how to strengthen your community leadership role, consider taking the following actions:

- Learn about how other foundations have used information to play a leadership role in their community by reading *Opportunities for Foundation Leadership* (published February 2011). www.informationneeds.org/leadership
- Identify your community's information needs with Knight Foundation's *Information Toolkit*, built in partnership with the Monitor Institute and with research support from The Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, which provides a step-by-step process to investigate the information health of your community. www.infotoolkit.org
- Take action on one or a few of the *Journalism and Media Grant Making: Five Things You Need to Know, Five Ways to Get Started*. <http://www.knightfoundation.org/blogs/knightblog/2011/2/14/journalism-and-media-grant-making-ideas-to-help-you-get-started/>
- Talk to your board and community partners about how your foundation can use information to play a more effective leadership role to address a community need.
- Contact a foundation that has engaged in a community information initiative by looking at projects happening across the country on the InformationNeeds.org website.

About FSG

FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation and research, founded in 2000 as Foundation Strategy Group and celebrating a decade of global social impact. Today, FSG works across sectors in every region of the globe – partnering with foundations, corporations, nonprofits and governments to develop more effective solutions to the world's most challenging issues. FSG brings together leaders who are hungry to exchange information, elevate learning and to create collective impact in discovering better ways to solve the world's most difficult social problems.

In the field of evaluation and performance measurement, FSG has significant client and thought leadership experience. FSG's approach focuses on the use of evaluation as a management tool to improve decision making and increase social impact. It uses traditional as well as innovative data-collection approaches to determine the effects and impacts an organization's efforts have produced over time – always with the purpose of informing and improving strategy and program implementation.

FSG's Strategic Learning and Evaluation Center offers several evaluation related services, which include designing and implementing developmental, formative and summative evaluations, building organization wide evaluation systems, building staff and grantee evaluation capacity, facilitating organizational learning processes and building the field through the development of tools, resources and research to support innovative evaluation practices.

For more information, visit fsg.org

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